BREAD

November 22, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 6:24-35

"Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle,... and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart."
-Psalm 104:14,15 (RSV)

Baking bread, for those of us who don't have to do it for survival, can actually be fun, relaxing, therapeutic even. One time a young friend of mine telephoned me on December 24, in the late morning. I could not have been busier. "Mr. Buchanan," she said, "please come right away. We're baking bread and we all agree you should come and help a while." I went... just for a few minutes, I told myself. I entered a kitchen that had been transformed from its prosaic and orderly daily processes into a wonderfully joyful and chaotic place. There were people there, busy, laughing. There were pots and pans and containers of ingredients and flour all over everything. And there was that odor; that odor which can stop me in my tracks; that odor which, even when I catch a whiff driving on a freeway, will command my attention and set me to looking for its origin. It is one of God's gifts - that odor of baking bread. So I rolled up my sleeves and put on an apron and she showed me how to knead and fold until my forearms ached; and I experienced how good that feels - how physical the whole process is and how all my senses were engaged. Did you ever notice how many artists paint bread? Did you ever notice how beautiful it is? Well, my young friend was twisting this dough I kneaded into some wonderful shape... I stayed too long, of course, and ate too much; but she was right, I really needed to be there. It taught me a good lesson, that although Gertrude Stein's, "A rose is a rose is a rose" may pretty well encompass the reality of a rose, a loaf of bread often is much more than bread. All of that has helped me understand what Jesus was getting at when he said, "I am the bread of life." And it prompts me to advise you that the next time someone invites you to help bake bread, drop whatever you are doing and go.

People in antiquity knew that bread is often more than bread. One of my interests is the religion of the Celtic people before Christianity came to Scotland in the Sixth Century. What happened when the two met was frequently a synthesis: remanents of the older, mystical religion can be seen within Christian customs. Christmas trees, wreaths and mistletoe are products of that confluence.

In a book of ancient Celtic prayers, the author tells about the "Consecration of the Seed" - a ritual with its origins in pre-Christian culture and still carefully practiced among the people of the Hebrides, a chain of islands - off the coast of Scotland. In the unforgiving climate of the islands a farmer needs all the help he can get. Planting is done with great care. "Three days before being sown, the seed is carefully sprinkled - (in a kind of baptism) with clean cold water, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The person sprinkling walks "sunwise" around the seed - in a solemn and picturesque ritual. An ancient prayer is invoked -

"I will go out to sow the seed,
In the name of Him who gave it growth:
I will place my front in the wind,
And throw a gracious handful on high...

Every seed that lay in sleep
Since the coming of cold without mercy
Every seed will take root in the earth
As the King of the elements descends
The braiard will come forth with the dew,
It will inhale life from the soft wind."
[Celtic Invocations,
Alexander Carmichael, p. 60]

The inhabitants of those islands, long before Christianity, and long after, knew that bread - the product of that critical planting - was the one thing standing between hope and despair, laughter and tears, literally life and death. You and I have to work hard intellectually to understand that. But for most of the people in human history and for vast numbers of people alive today, bread is more than bread. Bread is life. And among those in history who knew that in all its urgency and poignancy, were the members of that small band of people huddled on the coast of Massachusetts during the winter of 1620, whose lease on life was, quite simply, one growing season.

Sometimes bread is more than bread. One time Jesus took bread and broke it and said, "Take, eat, this is my body broken for you - do this in remembrance of me." During the London blitz, many children were removed to the countryside. It became quickly apparent that family separation was more painful and harmful than the terror of nightly bombing. So children were encouraged to bring reminders of their families with them. One child slept every night with a piece of bread from her family's dinner table clutched in her hand. Bread, for her, was a sacrament, a reminder - of a relationship and a blessed promise of joyful reunion, peace and love." [see Lawton Posey, The Ministry, 3/80, p. 31, Bread & Wine]

Sometimes bread symbolizes whatever it is we need to be alive, to be human. The traditional Hebrew prayer - "Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth" is much more ancient even than the Celtic invocation. And one day, Jesus - who certainly knew that prayer and prayed it every day, said something the world has never been able to stop pondering -

"I am the bread of life: the man or woman who comes to me will never hunger."

He had fed a large crowd of people with a few loaves of bread and a few fish. The next day that same crowd was back. "God gave our ancestors manna in the wilderness every day," they said. Translate that: "How about some more of that free bread, Jesus?" He responded, "the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said, "Lord, give us this bread always." And he answered, "I am the bread of life."

Now that does not mean that Jesus didn't care about the bread that is bread. After all, he provided a substantial meal the day before. Besides, I believe only someone who loves bread - who knows its look and aroma and feel and taste - could use it as a metaphor for something else. My guess is that the one who called himself the bread of life, knew and loved the bread which fills the air with its bouquet and the very sight of which is a reminder of the needs of the flesh which, on measure, are among the Creator's better ideas.

The one who used bread to symbolize our salvation knew it first, I believe, as an expression of nature's goodness and benevolence. He knew the ancient prayer and he also knew Psalm 104 in which God is praised for "wine to gladden the heart, oil to make the face shine and bread to strengthen the heart."

I've read and heard that Psalm all my life without noticing that bread strengthens the heart; not the back or shoulders or stomach, but the heart, which in Hebrew terms is where we live, the focus of being, spiritual and physical.

Bread is a symbol of our wholeness, the unity of our humanity. The best of our Jewish heritage is a joyous, lusty, sensual affirmation of the creation. What a profound mistake to forget that and conclude that our spirits are good but our bodies are bad, that God made a mistake when he gave us physical bodies. The Greeks thought like that and all too frequently Christians have flirted with Greek philosophy at the expense of their Jewish foundations.

The creation is God's. It is God's idea. Human bodies are God's invention. Helmut Thielicke, one of the great German preachers during the Second World War, once quipped to his Stuttgart congregation that if they could take only one item into the air raid shelter and had to choose between a wool sweater and a volume of poems, they should grab the sweater. Thielicke also said somewhere that even Beethoven sounds lousy on an empty stomach.

Bread is a scriptural reminder that our world was made by God and reflects God. In Hans Kung's memorable phrase, the creation is the "unfolding of God." Bread is a powerful reminder that our humanity and our needs are part of God's creation, intended, blessed and loved by God; that food always has sacramental potential; that it is an act of unfaithfulness

not to enjoy and rejoice in and be grateful for that great gift. A Christian mystic in the Middle Ages, Meister Eckhart, observed that if the only prayer you ever utter is "Thank you God for this bread" - you have said enough.

That's what Thanksgiving is for. It is not an exercise in pride - thanking God for so richly blessing us while neglecting his less fortunate children in Ethiopia - but "Thank you God for this bread..." a profound affirmation of the basic goodness of the creation and God's presence in creation. I've always loved those Pilgrims whose idea was this holiday. They were not as solemn and dour as the Puritans who followed them. Puritans were suspicious of the flesh. The Pilgrims were very happy this flesh was still alive. When they had the chance they ate and drank heartily and loved and laughed and sang their beloved Psalms with "mirth" which always sounded to me like piety with a twinkle in its eye - jolly religion.

Bread is a reminder that this is God's world, that God intended our humanity, and that both our hunger and its satisfaction are part of God's will and intent. God has created our physical needs and a world capable of meeting them. Edna St. Vincent Millay had that wonderful mystery in mind when she wrote...

<u>God's World</u>

"O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
Thy mists, that roll and rise!
... Lord I do fear
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year;
My soul is all but out of me."

But there <u>is</u> a deeper hunger, isn't there? There is a hunger that lingers and grows even after we have eaten the bread that is only bread; a hunger which reflects something other and deeper than the demands of the body. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." That points to a profound and compelling human need. It is our need to know something eternal. It is our need to be loved and wanted. It is our need to be needed. It is our need to be secure and safe. It is our need to know that our modest little lives are not biological accidents, but that they are intended, that we matter, count for something; that when it's all over our being here will have added up to something. That's bread of life. That's bread to strengthen the heart.

That hunger shows up all over the place: in the plaintiff confession of a middle-aged man or woman who says to the counselor - "All I really want is to be wanted. All I really need is to know that I'm needed." It shows up in the alcoholic rage of a person who is not loved by anyone. It shows up in the paranoia of homeless people who have learned to trust no one and who know they do not count. It appears in the mindless violence in gang culture among young people who have learned that life - their lives - matter to no one and in the polite violence of a political

mentality which tells people they really don't matter - by reducing programs to help the poor, sick, aged, the young. It shows up personally when we have accomplished what we set out to accomplish, when in the midst of the sweetness of success and victory, you and I know a hunger that has not yet been addressed.

Philosopher Ernest Becker wrote "Man transcends death by finding meaning for his life. It is the burning desire of the creature to count. What (we) really fear is not extinction, but extinction without significance."

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" and the inference is that there was a hunger in those people which would not be satisfied by manna from heaven. There is a hunger in us which is not satisfied by food; that there is a security and freedom that goes beyond full barns; and that there is a thanksgiving which affirms the goodness of the creation and goes beyond to confront the Creator.

How simple life would be if it were not so. How simple if human need began and ended with enough bread to eat and a place to sleep. Then it comes to us that we are human precisely in that hunger which the bread that is only bread does not satisfy: that it is our hunger, our relentless search for meaning that is our glory. It comes to us that St. Augustine was gloriously on target in his prayer, "Thou hast made our hearts restless until they find their rest in thee." The hunger itself is of God.

Our physical appetite and needs are created in us by the Creator. Our hunger for truth, our thirst for beauty, our longing for love and meaning, for relationships and affirmation are gifts God gives to us.

"Give us this bread always" the crowd said to Jesus. We ask for what we need ultimately. We ask for bread - bread that is bread, and bread that is life. We are hungry, for a sense now and then that we are intended, that we are loved by God and safe in God. We are hungry for some sense that we are more than a biological coincidence, that we are accepted and loved by that which is greater.

We are hungry for bread to strengthen our hearts, which is to say - Bread of Life. That's what the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers... When we have it, we are safe and free and profoundly, deeply joyful. With that, regardless of our circumstances, in sickness and health, in life and in death, in prison, hospital bed, living room and board room, on the rocky shores of the New World, or around a table laden with food next Thursday. Regardless of circumstance, when we have known in Jesus Christ that we are intended and loved and safe ultimately, and therefore free - we know what Thanksgiving is.

Bread - the goodness of the creation and the goodness of the Creator...

Artists express it when our words aren't adequate. It is what Paul Winter's music is about. It is what the music of Thanksgiving calls out of us... "Now Thank We All Our God..." "We Praise Thee O God, Our Redeemer, Creator..." and the poet - E. E. Cummings:

> "i thank You God for most this amazing
> day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
> and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
> which is natural which is infinite which is yes."

"I am the bread of life" he said. "I am God's love. I am the bread you need." He was born in Bethlehem - this bread of life. What few know is that Bethlehem means "House of Bread."

Come to him and know his love for you... Give yourself to him... and you will never hunger. Amen.